

U.S. child-poverty rate declines

But a study finds the rate in the Central Valley is higher.

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WASHINGTON — The number of children living in poverty in the United States has declined significantly since 1993, partly reversing a longer-term increase that began two decades ago, according to a Columbia University study to be released today.

The percentage of children living in poverty in the United States fell by 17% from 1993 through 1998, the study says, and the improvement was particularly pronounced in traditionally poor southern states such as Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas and South Carolina.

Even with that decline, however, 18.7% of American children younger than 18 — almost one in five — lived in families in 1998 with incomes below the federal poverty line — \$16,660 for a family of four.

Those almost 13.3 million children represented a decline from the 1993 level of 15.6 million children, or 22.5%, who were living in poverty. But the 1998 figure remains above the 1979 rate of 16.2%, when 10.3 million children were poor.

But the rate of poverty for children in California and in its Central Valley appears high-

er than the national average. Researchers for the Kids County survey found 25% of California children live in poverty, up from the 1990 rate of 21%.

And the news is grim for children younger than 5 living in the San Joaquin Valley. The California Report Card 1999 found 42.2% of children in Fresno County living in poverty, ranking it third in the state. Tulare County had the second-highest rate in the state with 49.5% of its young children in poverty.

The report issued in November by Children Now, a nonprofit child policy and advocacy organization, also found statewide that 28.6% of children younger than 5 are living in poverty.

Researchers say that the nationwide declining poverty rate appears to reflect two fundamental trends of recent years: the booming economy and welfare-reform initiatives.

On a related issue, a study issued Thursday by the Children's Defense Fund found that nearly 12 million children lack health-insurance coverage, despite the fact that 7 million of them are eligible for Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program in the states. California and Texas each had more than 1 million uninsured children and one in three Hispanic children is without health coverage, the group found.

Such reports come in a year when politicians of both major parties have decried the level of child poverty and proposed widely di-

vergent ways to remedy the problem. On Thursday, Vice President Al Gore said Democrats deserve credit for welfare-reform policies that "moved millions from welfare to work" and for an economic climate that provided jobs for those moving off the rolls. Gore has said he would support a proposed \$1 increase in the minimum hourly wage and an expansion of the earned-income tax credit, which raises many working-poor families above the poverty line.

Gore also has called on state governments to offer preschool programs to all children, an initiative that likely would have a strong impact on children of the working poor.

Vowing to "leave no child behind," Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush has proposed an \$8 billion package of tax incentives and government grants to expand the work of faith-based charities in providing job training, mentoring and other services to the poor. And he has unveiled a broad tax cut that he says would reach out to "working families on the outskirts of poverty."

On Thursday, Gore promised a focus on "the next generation of welfare reform, to encourage responsible fatherhood." Such initiatives, supported by both Republican and Democratic candidates, could affect poor children by driving down the number of single parents and increasing the role of wage-earning fathers in their children's lives.

■ Bee staff writer Barbara Anderson contributed to this report.